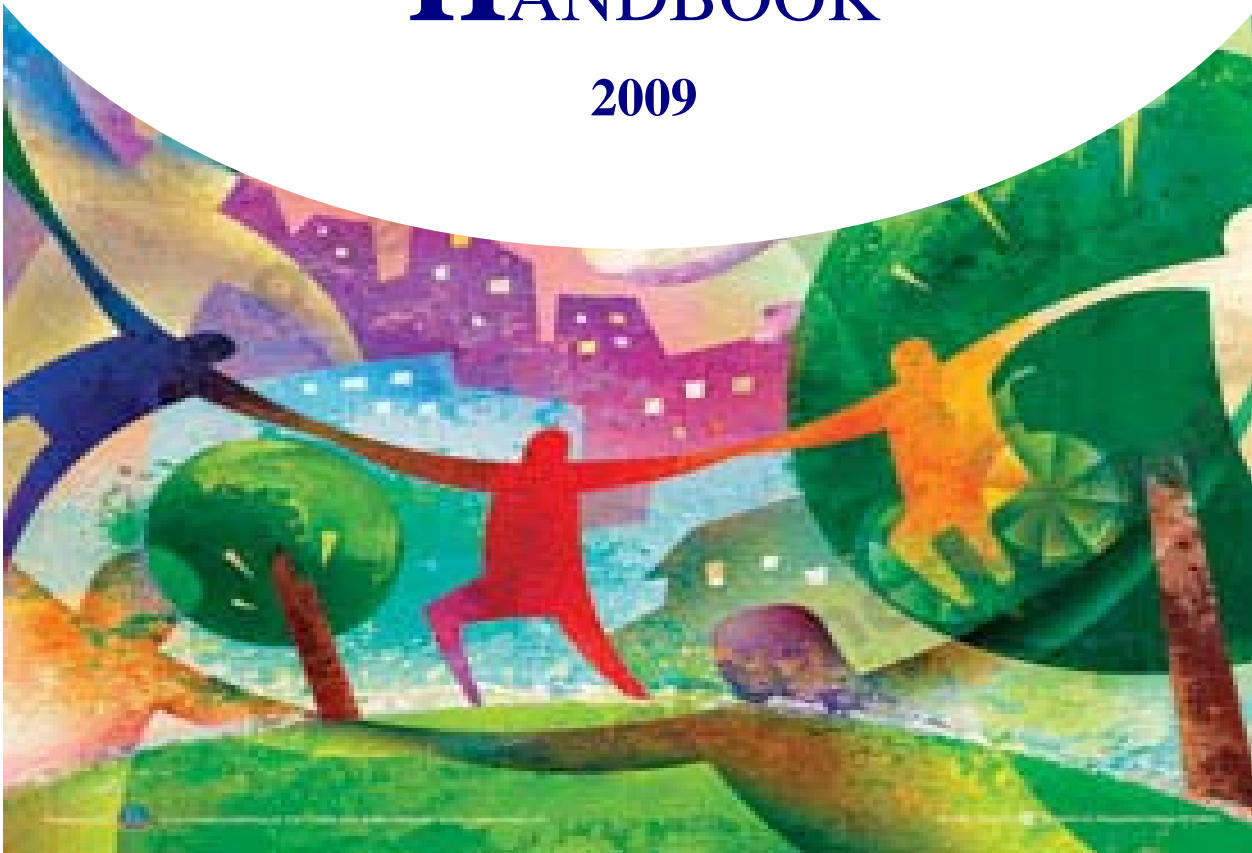




NRCS Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

United
States
Department of
Agriculture

MENTOR PROGRAM HANDBOOK 2009



USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Tennessee Mentoring Program

Mission: One mission of the Tennessee Civil Rights (CR) Committee is to develop, oversee, review and provide program maintenance for a successful Tennessee mentoring program.

Vision: Diverse and successful mentoring partnerships that provide a connection to experience, knowledge, trust, diversity, and improved personal and professional work environments.

INTRODUCTION

The history of mentoring can be traced back thousands of years. Men and women plotting the paths of their lives and careers have long sought the wise and experienced counsel of a confidant, one whose judgment was valued and lasting.

Webster defines a mentor as a wise and trusted counselor, teacher, and an experienced individual who helps an employee grow and succeed. The relationship requires the investment of time and self; giving but receiving as well. Mentoring offers the chance to expand the horizons of others by providing insight and guidance based on one's real-life work experiences. Mentoring is available to ALL Employees. It is a trusted relationship whereby freedom of expression and opinion is honored yet never compromised.

To become a mentor you must evaluate your entire career. Perhaps your first day on the job was full of apprehension, anxiety, and the desire to do well matched against the fear of failure. Then slowly but surely you began to "learn the ropes" from those who trained you. Eventually you gained the confidence and expertise necessary to accomplish the job. A mentor provides that extra opinion needed to gauge one's desires and hopes in order to succeed.

Each of us needs guidance periodically throughout our careers. If a mentor's advice proves beneficial even to one employee, the process is a success. That success also benefits the mentor and the agency.

The opportunities to mentor are many. Consider the path your career has taken and if you're interested in sharing some advice for the enhancement of all concerned, consider being a mentor.

Our goals for this program complement NRCS organizational objectives to:

- Improve leadership and organizational skills
- Help employees achieve full performance potential
- Acclimate new employees to NRCS culture and organization
- Develop and retain highly skilled, knowledgeable employees.

What is Mentoring?

Mentoring is a partnership between an experienced employee (the mentor) and an employee who desires additional personal or professional knowledge (the protégé). The mentor is willing to guide, support, answer questions, provide referrals, and share experiences with the protégé. The partnership is based on trust and confidentiality.

Mentoring is NOT:

- A replacement of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Civil Rights Program, Career Counseling or other personnel programs.
- Special treatment, preferential promotion or sponsorship.
- Top-down, driven by the mentor. The partnership is driven by the needs of the protégé and the protégé makes the decisions.

Why be a Mentor or a Protégé? To:

- Reach your full potential, both professionally and personally
- Share knowledge and experiences
- Build listening and communication skills
- Build understanding of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity
- Improve the work environment

Do you have what it takes to be a Mentor?

- Do you have the time and commitment to build a partnership with a protégé?
- And are you willing to share you experiences in:
 - Life
 - Work
 - Career changes
 - Parenting
 - Special skills

RELATIONSHIP

Trust, friendship, and honesty are key ingredients to a mentoring relationship. It is, after all, a situation to foster career development. Whether contact is made in person, by telephone or by mail, each is encouraged to contact the other.

A mentoring relationship will last a short or long period of time, as long as it remains viable and beneficial. Changes of circumstances such as transfers, retirements, separations, and death keep mentoring relationships under constant reevaluation. Such changes may result in emotions that range from excitement to resentment, joy to anger, and optimism to cynicism. Knowing when and how to fine-tune the mentoring relationship is the key to making it work.

One example of that might be cross-gender mentoring relationships. While not necessarily counter-productive, one has to be aware of several facts. Such relationships will be under close scrutiny in the workplace and could generate suspicion, resentment, rumors and threats. If not constantly fine-tuned, the mentoring relationship could prove harmful to both mentor and employee with long-term adverse affects. Again such a relationship is not discouraged but must be put in perspective.

What do mentors do?

- Provide confidential counseling to employees outside of their chain of command.
- Provide encouragement and guidance on training and development issues, as well as support on a personal level.
- Be reasonably accessible and willing to make and receive some calls.
- Refer the protégé to his/her supervisor, EO Counselor, Employees Assistance Program, or Human Resources Office as appropriate when other counseling is needed.
- The mentor should not interfere with supervision or workload of protégé.
- Serve as a role model on how to conduct oneself in the professional world.
- Devote time to one on one discussion with the protégé.
- Recognize and validate signs of protégé professional growth and development.
- Stay flexible. Mentor relationships vary across organizational settings and protégé needs change.
- When appropriate,
 - Encourage and convey a sincere belief in a protégé's ability to succeed.
 - Provide advice, constructive feedback on the protégé's actions and products, formal and informal instruction.
 - Introduce the protégé to people who can help.
 - Provide suggestions for the protégé to demonstrate her/his skills.
- Recognize that mentoring relationships can be short term or long lasting.
- Don't give up if the chemistry doesn't feel right at the first meeting.
- Touch base regularly by e-mails, phone, etc.

- Maintain confidentiality. Nothing kills trust in a mentoring relationship faster than a breach of confidence.
- Pick up on cultural and gender differences and be sensitive to these differences.
- Have fun.

What do protégé's do?

- Define personal and career goals, as well as expectations from a mentor and the mentor program.
- Actively participate in and take full advantage of activities and services available from the mentor program.
- Accept responsibility for his/her decisions.
- Maintain communication in an honest and open relationship with mentor, and be prepared with questions and goals for interaction with the mentor.
- Recognize that this program is only a supplement for his/her own hard work and abilities, not a substitute.

What can mentors and protégés do together?

- Talk together about:
 - Past experiences
 - Goals
 - Plans
 - Skills-present and desired
 - Career paths
 - Useful problem solving strategies
 - Struggles and successes
 - Expectations from the mentoring relationship
 - Preferred ways of interacting
 - The fact that the relationship may change and end one day
- Agree on how the relationship will work. Outline expectations about the frequency and type of contact.
- Attend meetings, conferences, and other events together whenever possible.
- Work together on projects.
- Have the protégé observe the mentor handling challenging situations.
- Role-play situations faced by the protégé.
- Exchange and discuss written materials such as a document written by the protégé or an article valued by the mentor.
- Co-author a publication.
- Interact with other people including persons who could be of help to the protégé and other mentor-protégé pairs.

How to Participate...

All employees may participate in the mentor program on a voluntary basis by submitting an application to the Civil Rights Liaison Officer or the State Mentor Coordinator.

Program Evaluation

Periodically, employees and assigned mentors will complete an evaluation using the Mentor Program Evaluation Form. Evaluations will be used by the CR Committee to monitor the overall effectiveness of the program and recommend any needed changes in its administration to the State Conservationist.

ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES

Eligibility and Responsibility

Employees can voluntarily apply to become a mentor or protégé in the Tennessee NRCS Mentor Program. Individuals can be mentors and protégés at the same time. Mentors should have some or all of the following characteristics:

- Positive attitude.
- Self-motivated.
- Good role model.
- Respected.
- Good listener.
- Available time to devote to one-on-one discussions.
- Secure as an individual.
- Trustworthy.
- Committed to the employee's career and concerns.
- Committed to the Natural Resources Conservation Service.
- Sensitive to the needs of others.
- Knowledge of how the organization works.
- Varied work experience.

Mentor applications will be reviewed and selections made by the State Conservationist with advice from the CR Committee. It is also recognized that some individuals may be sought out to a great extent, and therefore could incur a large workload related to this program. For this reason, the intent is also to manage the request for mentors as much as possible in order to prevent undue burdens on any one individual.

Overall Program Responsibilities

The State Conservationist will be responsible for the overall implementation and evaluation of the program. The Tennessee CR Committee will provide oversight of the Mentor Program. The CR Committee will also make recommendations for the Mentor Committee. This Committee will have one or two representatives from each administrative area and one from the state office. The State Mentor Coordinator will be the Human Resources Manager.

Mentor Responsibilities

- (1) The mentor will support the role of the supervisor in all interactions with the recipient. The mentor will not take on the role of an EO Counselor or receive grievances from the recipient. The mentor will not answer personnel questions. The mentor may make recommendations to seek advice from others.
- (2) The mentor will arrange for personal visits whenever feasible and necessary. The mentor will control costs of mentoring activities as much as possible.

Protégé Responsibilities

- (1) The protégé must realize that the success of the program is ultimately the responsibility of the protégé. The protégé must take the initiative in realizing the full potential of this program, and of his or her own career.
- (2) The protégé will not attempt to circumvent normal supervisor/employee interactions or decisions through this program. The protégé will not attempt to file EO/CR complaints or grievances through the mentor.

Supervisor Responsibilities

The supervisor will support the role of a mentor or protégé under their supervision as defined in this Manual or in any other directives issued by the State Conservationist. Supervisors need to recognize that if any of their employees are assigned a mentor, it is in no way a reflection on them as a supervisor. Supervisors will assure that new employees are informed of the Mentor Program.

Selection of Mentors and Protégés

Mentor Selection

The State Conservationist will ask for volunteers to become mentors. Each volunteer will be given a brief application form to complete and return to the Civil Rights Liaison Officer or Mentor Coordinator. The State Mentor Coordinator along with the Mentor Committee will review and confidentially maintain these applications. The Mentor Committee will make the mentor selections, and with the concurrence of the State Conservationist, will distribute a list of those individuals in the Mentor Pool.

Protégé Selection

After the Mentor Pool is distributed to all employees, those who wish to be protégés will submit brief applications to the Civil Rights Liaison Officer or State Mentor Coordinator. The Coordinator along with the Mentor Committee will review these applications, confidentially maintain these applications, and make mentor/protégé assignments. The protégé, the supervisor, and the mentor will then be notified.

Guidelines Related to Selection and Interactions

- (1) Confidentiality of applications and other material related to the selection process will be maintained by the CR Committee. In addition, the discussions of mentors and protégés must be kept confidential.
- (2) Protégés should request mentors who are not in their direct line of supervision. Supervisors will continue to provide career counseling as before.
- (3) Because of the complexity of interpersonal interactions, the normal changes in personal workload demands, and other possible conflicts associated with this type of activity, mentor/protégé assignments can be terminated at any time by either party. It is important for anyone involved to realize termination of an assignment does not necessarily reflect on an individual's personality or desirability as a mentor or protégé.
- (4) Many of the interactions necessary for this program can be carried out over the phone. Personal meetings are encouraged when arranged in conjunction with normal work assignments, other meetings, training sessions, etc. The State Conservationist

fully supports all mentoring activities as long as they do not interfere with the performance of an employee's official duties.

Evaluations

An annual brief evaluation form will be distributed to all employees enrolled in the Mentor Program. Mentors and protégés will be encouraged to complete the evaluations.

CONCLUSION

Mentoring is not to be entered into lightly. It takes dedication, time, honesty and sincerity. That's just to get started! Once a relationship has been formed, effort to keep it on track is demanding yet rewarding. Even the best of efforts are not enough at times and the relationship must be severed for the good of the mentor, the employee, protégé and the agency.

But instead of the end, a new beginning could appear, and again, the cooperation of all three ingredients is required: employee, mentor and agency. The employee can develop the relationship with a new mentor and the process is again revived.

The mentor is held in esteem, one that can be depended on for straightforward advice regardless of its potential effects. The advice will provide a foundation for sound decision making by the employee. After all, this is what mentoring is all about.